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Thinking ahead for Europe

Climate policy in 2025 – after eight years of Trump in the White House

Milan Elkerbout**16 December 2016**

The victory of Donald Trump has cast a long, dark shadow over the future of the Paris Agreement, just days after its early entry into force on November 4th, to the pleasant surprise of many. Although climate change hardly featured in the US election campaign, President-elect Trump acknowledged his doubts about the validity of climate science and stated his intention to withdraw from the global climate accord. He has also expressed support for fossil fuel use and concerns about the competitiveness of US industry.

The likely consequences of Trump's dismissive stance towards (multilateral) climate action are compounded by a strengthened Republican Party in the US Congress, which continues to hold a majority of seats in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. As shown by the George W. Bush administration, GOP majorities are not conducive to progress on international climate policy.

Even so, President George W. Bush did not abandon the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), an international treaty (and UN body) which the US joined at its inception at the behest of President George H.W. Bush in 1992. If the Trump administration is indeed determined to retreat from international climate change policy, what are its options for doing so, and what is the outlook for the rest of the world and the UNFCCC processes?

Another question that deserves examination is what global climate policy will look like after eight years of President Trump. Why eight? US presidents tend to win re-election. Treating Donald Trump as a *sui generis* case, by downplaying his electoral chances and confounding reasonable expectations with wishful thinking, has already led to perilous consequences. Climate policy both domestically and globally should prepare for two terms of President Trump.

Withdrawal from the Paris Agreement

Now that the Paris Agreement has entered into force and become international law, no single country can 'cancel' it (as Trump announced he would do during his campaign) and it will continue to apply to the other UNFCCC Parties (i.e. the rest of the world), even if the US withdraws.

Withdrawal from the Paris Agreement can only be done three years after its entry into force, i.e. from 4 November 2019 onwards. It then takes another year to complete the withdrawal process. It is no coincidence that the length of time required to completely withdraw from the

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Agreement is the same as a US president's term. In fact, many of the legal characteristics of the Paris Agreement were expressly concluded with US politics in mind.

Hence, Article 4.4 of the Paris Agreement states: "Developed country Parties *should*" undertake absolute economy-wide emissions reduction targets, not "*shall* [undertake]". Hence, many of the processes agreed in Paris are legally binding, but not the plans to which countries commit themselves.

Notwithstanding these efforts at 'US-proofing', eight years would give President Trump ample time to officially withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement. In a swifter and more definitive manner, Trump could also decide to withdraw from the UNFCCC altogether, which can be completed within one year following notification of such intent. While this would indeed be an unprecedented and aggressive move, it would also be a clear and straightforward enunciation of deep climate scepticism.

What will happen to global climate leadership in the absence of the US pushing the envelope? EU climate action indeed is ambitious, but it is also taken for granted, and its dwindling share of global emissions limits the clout it has in climate leadership going forward. China is an obvious successor to carry the torch, but its leadership is quite different in character from that in the US or the EU, and it is driven more by domestic concerns about air quality and other associated 'co-benefits', than by the determination to tackle climate change in the long term. China's stance during recent WTO talks on trade in 'green goods'¹ shows that it may not be willing to lead in all venues.

The Trump administration engaging with the UNFCCC

Withdrawal by the US in any way would undoubtedly be a huge blow to international climate policy. But what if the Trump administration decides not to withdraw from the UNFCCC, but instead partakes in the negotiations aimed at implementing the Paris Agreement?

Key topics at stake in the forthcoming implementation talks include the transparency and review mechanism, which would help in comparing all countries' efforts and the ratcheting up of ambition over time; climate finance, which pivots around how to actually make sure that the \$100 billion that has been pledged to developing countries by developed countries is actually made available; and other contentious issues such as 'response measures', which should address the negative consequences of mitigation measures, and the proposed international market mechanism.

Also of immediate concern to climate negotiators is the 'informal dialogue' set to take place in 2018. Aimed at spurring greater ambition on mitigation action before 2020, this dialogue will be held against the backdrop of an upcoming IPCC Special Report on achieving the 1.5C temperature goal included in the Paris Agreement.

This exercise could set important precedents for the global 'stocktakes' that will be conducted every five years from 2023 onwards. If a major emitter such as the US would be, at best, reluctant to engage in 'stocktaking' that should raise ambition levels globally, it will not only hold back its own ambitions, but it will also make other countries less willing to do so.

Some observers have noted that the threat posed by a Trump administration to climate policy is limited, pointing to rapidly improving economic fundamentals for renewables, the continued efforts of US states (such as California and the RGGI states, which have put in place carbon pricing schemes), and the resolve to continue to implement the Paris Agreement that was reaffirmed by all countries at COP22 in Marrakech.

¹ <http://www.dw.com/en/world-trade-organization-green-goods-negotiations-collapse/a-36637163>

With US states renewing their commitments, and, even more, as the economic fundamentals keep improving, this will indeed ensure continued emissions reductions. But this is not sufficient reason to cheer. The Paris Agreement is intended as a starting point, leading to a significant ratcheting up of ambition over time. The pace of emissions reductions should accelerate. The carbon budgets for 2C, let alone “well below 2C” or 1.5C do not allow for eight years of dithering on ambition.

Hence, after two terms of President Trump, the world may well see itself with an incomplete or flawed Paris rulebook, a poor transparency regime undermining the global stocktakes, a \$100 billion climate finance goal that is fast receding, no progress on climate policy in other multilateral venues and no contributions from an international market mechanism.

More importantly, it may have failed to capitalise fully on two crucial climate confabs: the 2018 informal dialogue and the 2023 global stocktake, which will lead to updated commitments from all countries for the post-2030 period. Coinciding with this stocktake, 2023 may also be the year when the EU would discuss its ambition for 2040, in much the same way that the 2030 Framework was agreed on in the European Council of October 2014. Eight years of President Trump will indeed send a long echo in domestic climate policy-making.

Achieving the objectives of the Paris Agreement was already a tall order without Trump’s election. With eight years in office, no amount of state and city action and falling costs in renewables can compensate for the loss of momentum and a breach in global consensus, just at the time when those things were needed the most.